

More than three million elderly people face a life of loneliness because of family break-ups and a lack of friendly neighbours

By Steve Doughty

Around three and a half million older people face a life alone and without help or friendship from their neighbours, new research said yesterday.

It warned that loneliness effects physical health and can be as damaging as smoking or obesity to an older person.

The analysis said that 700,000 people aged over 65 say they are often, or even always lonely, and the same number do not know their neighbours at all.



A life of loneliness: Age UK said that over half of all older people see the television as their main form of company

The report from Age UK comes in the wake of state figures which revealed rapidly growing numbers of middle aged people who live on their own.

More...

- One in four pensioners who pay for their own care face losing their home and savings
- He can't touch Google and Starbucks, but the taxman's gone to war with pensioners

They suggested that there are six million people aged over 45 who live by themselves, without a husband, wife, partner or children.

The charity's findings yesterday add to the evidence that the spread divorce and family break-up are producing older generations of lonely people, and warn that help from outside the family can be hard to find for those who are on their own.

Its survey results said that over half of all older people see the television as their main form of company.

The everyday difficulties and health problems that go with loneliness worsen in the winter, the report said.



Older people on their own do not get to know the neighbours as many do not want to be a burden and others think their neighbours always seem to be busy

'The winter can be harrowingly difficult for thousands of older people,' it said.

'The colder weather brings with it a massive increase in associated health problems for older people, including heart attacks and strokes, respiratory problems, pneumonia and depression.

'During the winter isolation can also intensify, having an adverse effect on physical and mental well-being and some studies prove that feelings of loneliness can be equivalent to well-established risk factors such as obesity and smoking.'

The research, based on a survey of more than 1,000 older people, said that the main reasons older people on their own do not get to know the neighbours is that many do not want to be a burden and others think their neighbours always seem to be busy.

The charity asked people to rally round older neighbours.

Its chief Michelle Mitchell said: 'The winter can cause misery, avoidable illness and even death for too many older people.

'We are hoping to inspire everyone to do their bit to lessen the impact of winter for older people this year.

'There is something simple that everyone can do from popping in to check on an older neighbour to making time for older relatives.

'As we experienced as a nation this summer, it feels good to come together and help each other out. Small things and a friendly face make all the difference.'

The charity's concern for older people follows the new analysis of numbers living alone published by the Office for National Statistics earlier this month.

The official figures showed that there are nearly two and a half million men and women aged over 45 but under 65 who have their own homes and no husband, wife, partner or children to live with them.

Their numbers have grown by over 50 per cent - more than 800,000 - since the mid-1990s.

A further 3.5 million over-65s are on their own.

The rise in middle-aged loneliness has gone hand in hand with the fast-rising popularity of cohabiting relationships, which are frequently short-lived, and with the fall in numbers who choose to get married.